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The Shame Game

Humiliation sucks, but it beats getting ignored. Actor John Leguizamo on the art (and commerce) of playing the fool.

I've had my chest hairs plucked with a tweezer at 5 A.M., I've stood unclothed in front of Sean Penn, I've confessed family secrets to a theater full of strangers, and without fail, I've loved every shameful second of it. (Though Sean did tag me with the nickname Señor Tinymeat, which still stings.) Yes, I suffer from a pathetic need to be noticed, and if my job requires me to abandon any semblance of human dignity, it sure beats being ignored.

Humiliation leaves you naked in front of a world that stops snickering only long enough to pick up a Handicam. (Ever wonder why the phrase "bare-ass" sits right in the middle of the word "embarrassing"?) My entire life has more shame than a convention of priests in Las Vegas. If you think I'm kidding, I could show you reviews I got for *Super Mario Brothers*, a film so bad Siskel and Ebert gave it three thumbs down. Or worse, I could make you *watch* it.

Now, I do have one advantage: We Hispanic people don't blush. When white folks do something embarrassing, like lock the keys inside the Saab or overthrow a foreign government that turns out to have been democratically elected, they take on the hue of one of Elizabeth Hurley's dresses. But regardless of the circumstances, I stay the same *caffè latte* color. And with the help of this melanin camouflage, I learned to view failure not as a fault, but as an identity. John Leguizamo without shame would be as meaningless as Sharon Stone without bleach.

If it were possible to literally die of embarrassment, I'd have gone right from grade school to the grave. My birth in Colombia came after forty-eight hours of labor, so my mother hated me from the start. I was breast-fed, so my dad hated me, too. The first time my dad and I played catch, he ridiculed me. "You throw like a girl!" he cursed. I tore off my dress and ran inside the house.

Then my family moved from Brooklyn to Jackson Heights, and I had to memorize the phrase "I'm from Queens." In summer, like other ghetto mutts, I cooled off at the public swimming pools. But as a Catholic-school product, I was sure that if I got naked around other men, I'd turn into a pillar of salt. (All right, so I didn't pay close attention in Bible class. Hey, that was *before* Ritalin.) Men's locker rooms filled me with shame. I had what looked like a penis, only smaller. So I'd walk around for hours in wet swim trunks, riding the subway home, until my meat puppet looked like last month's bologna on Wonder bread.

By the time I was seventeen, I'd begun to figure out how to make humiliation work for me. I decided to become an actor. Actors, after all, can't succeed if they're afraid of embarrassment, any more than a surgeon can be afraid of blood, or a cop can be afraid of lying on the witness stand. When I was accepted into a prestigious acting school founded by Lee Strasberg, the patriarch of the American theater, I thought I'd shed the curse. In his class one spring day, I did a "sense memory" exercise, an acting drill in which I pretended to be holding an orange. I thought I did it well. Strasberg died the next day. This made me very unpopular among the other students, who had paid for the entire course in advance.

At nineteen, I began working at HB Studios under Herbert Berghoff, another revered thespian. I quickly gained renown in his class by powdering my hair white and reciting the grandfather's monologue from *Inherit the Wind*. My speaking voice sounded like Walter Cronkite after a stroke. Berghoff moaned as though he'd eaten bad meat loaf. Soon after I left the class, he was struck down by an aneurysm. If only my acting had the same effect on Siskel and Ebert.

My film career has been an exercise in even deeper forms of humiliation. I have only two types of roles: small parts in good movies (*Carlito's Way, Casualties of War*) or big parts in bad ones (*Whispers in the Dark, Street Hunter*).

When we began filming the rape scene in *Casualties of War*, Brian De Palma told me I'd have to appear naked. I said I wouldn't. He threatened to replace me. I said I would. Later, I had to persuade the crew that my member's excited state was a result of a rare urinary tract malady, not from my proximity to Michael J. Fox.

Soon after, I was cast as Terrorist Number Two in *Die Hard 2*, a rich, villainous part which called for me to confront Bruce Willis at the film's climax. When I arrived on the set, I discovered that the other terrorists were muscular and well over six feet tall. I'm under six feet tall. Well under six feet tall. Four inches under six feet tall. Because of the size discrepancy, I was instantly demoted to Terrorist Number Five, who dies in the middle of the film. I worked for days to devise a dramatic death face, only to learn I'd be wearing a ski mask in the scene. Then they decided to use a stuntman in my place. Finally, after four months' work, I was left with only two lines. Both of which were dubbed by another actor.

In *Executive Decision*, I played an army special-forces master sergeant. While we were training at Fort Bragg, carrying MP5 rifles through the woods, Steven Seagal

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By Ken Gross

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